DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 313 708 CS 212 169

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TITLE Marvelous Signals: The Usefulness of the In-Class Essay.
PUB DATE Apr 89
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Spring Conference of the National Council of Teachers of English (8th, Charleston, SC, April 6-8, 1989).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; *Essays; Expository Writing; Higher Education; *Skill Development; Teaching Methods; Writing (Composition); *Writing Exercises; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Writing Assignments; Writing Development; *Writing Functions

ABSTRACT

Based on his experience of being trained in a process-centered pedagogy and of working in a product-centered program, a writing instructor discovers that the in-class essay is not only a useful or workable part of a regressive curriculum, but that it is effective and necessary for any progressive process orientation as well. Pragmatic, ethical, and theoretical reasons exist for making extemporaneous writing at least half of the composition curriculum and for removing the stigma of the pre-new-paradigm approach to writing. The in-class essay is a marvelous signal of the strengths and weaknesses of student writing: it shows how the student is incorporating the instruction about the writing process; it reveals how well he or she will write an office memo, a letter to clients, or book reports and essays in other classes; it clarifies where in the writing process the student is and perhaps could go. Extemporaneous assignments, however, must be based on realistic writing situations and should include teacher observation of student behavior during the writing process and analysis of student "scratch" work and outlines. (KEH)

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Marvelous Signals:
The Usefulness of the In-class Essay

In coming up with a narrative opening for this essay, I found myself, inadvertantly, following the pattern of the hero set forth in Joseph Campbell's The Hero with a Thousand Faces. In his description of the monomyth, the hero moves through three giant archetypes: the departure, the initiation, and the return. However, if we allow the teacher as hero (a suspicious equation to be sure), we must change the title, in this case, to The Hero with a Thousand Papers to Grade.

Before the departure, I was a novitiate to the mysteries of English teaching in graduate school, trained according to all the fanciest and latest methods. We all worshipped at the shrine of James Moffett and student-centered pedagogy. We entuned the unquestionable truths of writing as process and prewriting and revision as sacrosanct--never to be questioned, and certainly never to be neglected. The method seemed to work, too. For when I intervened (another religious term) in the prewriting and when I assisted in the revision, the papers were always better, although they seemed, oddly enough, to resemble what I would have written myself.

In time, I had to leave this happy, halcyon period as I received the Call to teach at a small state college in Georgia. Economic necessity and ignorance motivated me happily toward this

CS212169

new post. Yet when I arrived with all my new vestements and accoutrements to administer the Communion of Process Theology to the unwashed, I met the Nemesis: a regressive curriculum. The school required that all student essays be written in class, in sixty minutes, on unannounced topics--all essays. This was an usettling predicament for me. I saw the greatness of my graduate education flicker; I felt grey hand of Accountability pull at my coat and snicker, and in short I was afraid.

Of course, I resisted this curriculum at first, but it simply was the way things were done. So I entered the second stage, initiation, a stage including what Campbell also calls the descent into the Belly of the Whale. Inside the total darkness of this curriculum, I gained enough humility to learn--to learn that there is a great deal of circularity in the process pedagogy, that students can learn in what appears (and in some cases is) regressive curicula. Primarily, I have returned to say that the in-class essay is not only a useful or workable part of a regressive curiculum, but also that it is necessary for any progressive curiculum; however, the in-class essay must be situated properly and still any curriculum based solely on in-class writing is incomplete, but no less complete than that based solely on a complete process orientation. My progressive strategy, then, for any regressive curriculum is a justification and resituation of in-class writing.

First, the justification. It should be no surprise to anyone that modern composition pedagogies have all but dismissed

the in-class essay as a dinosaur, a creature rarely seen in the more forward looking schools and one whose days are surely coming to an end. Moffett (whose ideas are still central to the theories behind modern composition pedagogy) describes the ideal writing assignment as follows:

> Ideally, a student would write because he was intent on saying something for real reasons of his own and because he wanted to get certain effects on a definite audience. He would write only authentic kinds of discourse such as exist outside of school. A maximum amount of feedback would be provided him in the form of audience response. That is, his writing would be read and discussed by this audience, who would also be the coaches. ... Thus instruction would always be individual, relevant, and timely. (193)

The picture is almost pastoral, a utopia. But this utopia, as the name implies, does not exist, and the attitude implied toward the in-class timed writng assignment is not only incomplete, or narrow minded, it is indefensible theoretically, ethically, and pragmatically. It is around these three adverbs, accordingly, that I shall organize my justification.

It is unrealistic to expect that by teaching only revised writing we are preparing the student for the writing demands he or she will face in the near future. Most of the conditions within which the student will have to write will be dictated to her and often the work will have to be performed in a first draft mode. This is a point many of us have known for a long time, but

it is only recently being reemphasized as a corrective to an over-liberal process program. Muriel Harris in her College English essay of February 1989 on the difference between one- and multi-draft writers points to this reality. She says:

> There are ... [of course] compelling reasons for helping students view first or working drafts as fluid and not yet molded into final form. ... On the other hand, we have to acknowledge that there are advantages in being able, where it is appropriate, to master the art of one-draft writing. When students write essay exams or placement essays and when they go on to on-the-job writing where time doesn't permit multiple drafts, they need to produce first drafts which are also coherent, finished final drafts. (174-175)

In other words, we need to provide the students with the abilities they need to perform the writing tasks--the real writing tasks--that will be required of them in other courses and after graduation.

If we look at the problem from the opposite perspective, the reality of the issue will appear much more familiar. The constant complaints that we hear from our colleagues and local employers is that students or graduates cannot write well enough to satisfy what they consider meager demands--book reports, paragraph and essay exam answers, memos, letters, and (what is often neglected but certainly very important) instructions, or under its more familiar name, process analysis. I am often amazed by students who had performed reasonably well or passably

well in composition classes who then only a term or two later write like functional illiterates in their literature classes. What is happening in these cases is that the student's achieved literacy or linguistic competency is too dependent upon cues that are too few and too restricted. The idea of training the student in the process of writing in order to empower him to write in all circumstances is just not working often enough and with a wide enough variety of students.

What we are forced to do then is to adopt a pragmatic approach to this problem and teach students to perform in the specific kinds of writing situations that they will face. These situations are extemporaneous and often dependent upon the genre of the environment. In other words, we must broaden the cues that the student needs to repond to, cues that do not and will never have the information and nurturing support as those included in long drawn out student-centered writing assignments. This is to say, our writing assignment must include extemporaneous writing of a variety of styles: essay responses to employment applications, essay exams, paragraph exams, instructions, letters, and memos. Furthermore, we must practice these until we get from the students what is expected, and if we demand it, if we settle for nothing less, we will get it--or at least more than we do now.

Briefly, then, our students trained in a process pedagogy are not performing well enough, often enough in timed writing conditions for us to ignore; therefore, we must include timed

writing conditions in our curriculum if we are to be at all comfortable with the shape of the curriculum.

The second justification centers on the ethical responbility we have as writing teachers. We are as it were the physician/coaches, as Moffett suggests, responsible for training our students' linguistic ability. As the coach, we drive them to work harder than they want to; we enter them in competitions; we even play psychological games to get our results. As coaches, we can become very pleased with appearances. But as physicians we know that behind the appearance of the strong performance may lie many problems. The most dangerous one is the illegal dependency on others--students, parents--this is the anabolic steroid of our profession. Also, the student may have any number of legal illnesses lying behind that healthy veneer: an overreliance on long incubation periods, on research tools, tutorials, proofreaders, spelling checkers, the supersitious comfort of a favorite place or typewriter or whatever. As physicians we cannot allow these problems to go undiagnosed; we must test for them with a devise that gets behind these appearances of the out of class, revised writing assignment--that test, the blood test of composition, is the in class essay. Even Erika Lindeman in her most progressive A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers admits to this point. She says:

> The best way to diagnose students' writing problems is to examine carefully samples of their work, ideallly two short papers with different discourse aims. Written in class

> during the first week of the course, the papers can tell us what students have already mastered and what areas we need to emphasize in our teaching. Diagnostic evaluations at mid term help us identify improvements students have made since the course began, [and] new problems which developed in overcoming previsous weaknesses. ... At the end of the course, diagnostic evaluations help us determine in what ways students' writing has improved and what elements of the course may need revision. (217)

Lindeman grudgingly admits therefore to a necessity for diagnosing beneath the surface of drafts.

Paradoxically, when we grade the various drafts in a process centered curriculum, we are always grading products, judging the relative differences between them and imputing what is going on in the process, the actual process, of writing. In the in-class situation, we should be less interested in the actual product--we always make allowances for its being in-class and try not to be "so hard" on couting off for spelling etc--so if our focus is just off-center regarding the product, what is it centered on? I want to argue that it is the process. When we set up an extemporaneous writing situation and observe the production, we can test the entire process better than any other condition.

This test, however, like many that physicians use is fallible. The student must take several sometimes; he must be comfortable with the test and not lock up in anxiety. However, if a student regularly performs at an unacceptable level on

extemporaneous demands, then something is wrong. We do not accept it if a student only mutliplies or divides only at home; we demand that he or she manage to perform at school.

What I am urging here is not that we should get the student to writing well in class because it is pragmatic--in this situation I would want to set up deliberately surprising requests; no, with this defense I am saying that we have an ethical obligation to check that which can't be checked through revised writing. (Now of course the obverse of this point is also true; that is, out of class writing must also be used to check a student's ability to use incubation, research tools, etc.) It cuts both ways. In Moffett's complaint against paragraph exercises he says that students "take a simplistic approach, avoid thinking subtly or completly, and say only what can lend itself readily to the prupose of the exercise. To make the paragraph come out right, they write things they know are studpid and boring" (207). The full force of this criticism obtains only if we accept stupid and boring work. However, as Mureil Harris argues creating mutiple drafts can generate some stupid activity as well. In discussing the case of dyed in the wool one-drafter Nina, Harris notes: "This distate for returning to a completed text can be the source of problems for these one-drafters. Forced by a teacher in a graduate course who wanted first drafts one week and revisions the next week, Nina explained that she deliberately resorted to 'writing a bad paper' for the first submission in order to submit her 'real' draft as the

'revised' paper" (184-185).

The last justification for extemporaneous writing based purely in theory. The process/product debate has been carried forward most often in convenient dichotomous metaphors, either as two different species (in class and out of class), or as two different ends of a continuum. All of these are misleading. We would be closer to the truth by adopting (as Young, Becker, and Pike did several years ago for describing the process of invention) a metaphor from physics and consider product and process on analogy with particle and wave--two states of one being, a being that changes states depending upon the how, when, and who of its observation. If one freezes in time one aspect of a work in progress, then there appears a product; if one examines a series of products over time, there is a process. We may also view this process relative to others and even then it becomes a production--another product. If any analysis demands a static perception, it is of a product/particle; if the analysis requires a dynamic perception, it of a process/wave.

If the particle/wave analology is too fanciful, we can simply look to a semantic analysis of the words to see how wrong it is theorectically to dismiss product analysis. The product of writing is both cause and effect of a meaning-creating process, so also the process of planning and revising is a cause and effect of the product. As such, product (linked to producing) and process (linked to processed) are concepts like cause and effect, interchangeable and dependent upon perception. One

cannot exist without the other. So also revised writing and extemporaneous writing are two sides of the same coin (or sign) one depending on the other. A piece of revised writing presents itself through a calculus of drafts of extemporaneous writing. Since in order to reproduce a draft one must in a instant create a response to the conditions of the given text, every instant of revision is an extemporaneous act. A piece of revised writing differs from a piece of extemporaneous wrinting only in that a revised essay is a summation of several attempts of extemporaneous writing.

My argument in this paper then is quite simple. From my experience of being trained in a process-centered pedagogy and of working in a product-centered one, I have come to realize the importance of an obvious fact--both aspects are necessary, but because the text-books and organization manifestos have tended to make the in-class essay assignment almost forbidden, a stigma indicating someone trained in the ancient uninformed traditions (the pre-new-paradigm approach to writing), now it seems necessary to scream out for a balance. So we have pragmatic, ethical, and theoretical resons for making the extemporaneous writing at least half of our curriculum. The in-class essay is a marvelous signal--it tells us much; it tells us how the student is incorporating his instruction about the writing process; it tells us how well he will write an office memo or a letter to clients; it can tell us where in the curly wave of process the student is and perhaps could go. However, we must bear in mind

these and other distinctions and situate the in-class writing assignment accordingly.

First, if we are looking to the extemporaneous assignment as a signal of how well that student will perform on timed writing in the world, then that assignment must be situated two ways. It must first of all be a part of practicing the assignment. Ken Macrorie said several years ago in arguing against regressive curricula that classroom writing is too artificial: "No one outside school ever writes anything called themes. Apparently they are teachers' exercises, not really a kind of communication" (Telling Writing 1976, 2). In this instance, we can't agree more. If the assignment is a letter for example, the student must have opportunity to know the genre well and to practice it on several different realistic writing situations. Here realistic would mean a variety of questions relative to the knowledge the student has at the time. Instead of the general knowledge of the company that he would work for, he has the knowledge of being a student in the class. (This points to a serious cause of students freezing up during pressured writing tasks. They feel that there is some knowledge required of them that they don't have. Obviously, if it is an exam, that may well be the case; however, proficiency exams, letters, memos are genre that always (or should be) context dependent. Once the students realizes that they have the knowledge being asked, they often perform remarkably better.)

Second, if we are looking for the signal as symptom of

ailments in the student's abilties; then obviously the assignment need not be one that is practiced, but rather it should be a surprise. The struggle here is making the student feel at ease with these testing situations when she knows that the assigment will be some strage off-the-wall request. The assignment should never be graded as are other assignments. As Lindeman claims:

> When we examine a paper diagnostically, we're concerned primarily with describing rather than judging or grading it. Although we inevitably compare it to some mental criteria for effective writing, our primarly purpose isn't to determine a letter grade. Rather, we want to know how the students write, what they're having trouble with, and why. (217)

Also the entire writing scene should be part of this "compositional blood test"; that is, the scratch work, outlines, etc, should be turned in and the behavior of the student, as much as possible, while working should be observed.

Finally, the theoretical justification asks us merely to see the extemporaneous piece of writing as indeed a marvelous signal, in whatever variety it appears, even in Macrorie's themes. All of our progressive talk of late has been dedicated to empowering the student by giving her control over her paper, yet somehow in the process of institutionalizing the pedagogy of process of teaching the methods of control, of controling the student's ability to control--the version notion or sense of control gets lost. As Robert Brook's cagy article on control concludes,

> "Writing, as a ongoing experience, is threatening to our ideas of control, espcially our ideas of conscious self-control. Our discipline's real advice to writers, in short, does not lie in any better or more effective methods for achieving control. ... Instead, what we can help younger writers do is accept a different way of imagining themselves -- a way of conceiving of the self which is not as threatened or troubled by internal confusion as the seemingly commonsensical classical subject. When we begin to think of ourselves (and our thinking, our writing) as provisional, as changing, as dymanmic, when we begin to see how problematic is our status as subject, then we can find that the threat associated with writing is more apparent than real" (416).

The only way to induce an acceptance of the problematic and provisional nature of the writer is by giving up the idea that the student must control all the factors of the writing situation, the factors of control change, and the student must be prepared for them. It is only by practicing in the widest variety of genre in both in class and out of class writing that we can nudge the student into giving up the demand for control and in so losing it gain it.

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